

# THE BLACK COBRA

BY MICHAEL WHITE



That Look Murchison Will Never Forget.

IF you go up to the Bronx Zoo in New York you will see in a glass case a black serpent that looks like the incarnation of all wickedness since the world began. He is labeled the King or Black Cobra, comes from India, and has a villainous disposition, not to be trifled with, lest a scratch from his fangs prove swiftly fatal. How such a manifestly undesirable slipped past the immigration authorities—But that is their affair. The point is, it was just another such venomous reptile with which Murchison had to deal in circumstances peculiar to the habitat of the black cobra.

An American firm had secured the contract for building the Marar State Railway, and Murchison was despatched thither to begin operations. Following him were the implements of his trade, including a steam shovel, clamshell pattern. When Murchison arrived in Marar, he found a compact, color-rioting native town clinging to the water edge of a holy but extremely murky river, with a backward elevation rising to a hill, over which rambled a maze of gloomy walls, turrets, and buildings, comprising the fort palace. He was given to understand that immured somewhere within its unknown recesses dwelt the young Queen of Marar, widowed since early childhood, and therefore passing her life in perpetual sacrifice to the memory of a husband—whom, to be sure, she had never actually set eyes upon. It was all very mysterious, even picturesque, particularly at sunset, when the palace was bathed in a glow of rose pink splendor, and a golden light gleamed upon the windows of exquisite marble fretwork.

This much for Marar; but it was surely Kismet—in India the mainspring of every motive—that prompted Murchison to select a site for his camp on the riverbank a little below the town, and set up his steam shovel adjacent to a small mud domed shrine or temple. The temple held a capacity of hardly more space than sufficed for a hideous image of the snake crowned and skull garlanded Goddess Kali,—of dread renown; for she delights in human sacrifices. Apparently it had proved unprofitable and been abandoned; for the little court and walls were almost buried under a rank growth of vegetation—an inviting spot for black or other cobras.

As to the steam shovel, it reared its giant boom aloft, ready to swing the powerful clamshell buckets in a wide circle. It was a thing of wonder to the unenlightened, hundreds watching its erection open mouthed but otherwise unable to express their feelings. Such opposing tendencies as these two objects represented were bound to produce trouble when brought into contact. Kali was not likely to yield to the steam shovel without a struggle, and the steam shovel was hardly a weakling. Thus it came about that no sooner had Murchison taken possession than the Brahmans discovered that the shrine temple had gained a new sanctity, which they declared was being profaned by the close proximity of the steam shovel. Also they were against him personally on every principle. Murchison did not purpose to interfere with the temple; but offered a reasonable price for such sentimental damage as it sustained. On this being refused with haughty offensiveness by the Brahmans, Murchison used the plain American tongue in telling them to go

hence swiftly lest they feel the force of his boot. They departed accordingly. He was secure within the legal rights of the contract; but if he thought he had overcome the wiles and resources of the Brahmans he was dwelling in a state of mistaken innocence.

IT was now for the Brahmans to prove the special sanctity of the temple, kindle popular feeling against him into riotous frenzy, and thereby drive him and his accursed steam shovel from the spot. Murchison heard of their tactics from Dost Ali, his native foreman. At first he was rather amused; but the matter grew serious enough presently.

"Sir," began Dost Ali, "report has it the Brahmans have been in council with yogis, goseins, and astrologers. Together they have found that the spirit of the late Raja has taken up its abode in that shrine temple."

"It has, eh?" smiled Murchison, glancing from the shade of his tent across the glare of noonday heat in the direction of the temple. His eye fell approvingly on his beloved steam shovel. "Well, I don't think much of the spirit's taste, if it can't find a better place to disport in than that old rubbish heap."

Dost Ali failed to perceive humor in the situation. Being a Mohammedan, he piously hated the Brahmans; but that did not leave him indifferent to their power in Marar.

"Doubtless what the Honor says is true," he spoke gravely; "but if this thing is proclaimed by the Brahmans, then no man will remain near that place. Even do I not care to see the Raja's ghost; for many of us still remember the blows of his stick. Who knows what devil form he may have entered into, Huzoor?"

Murchison endeavored to laugh away his foreman's qualms; but, seeing he made little impression, adopted a severe tone. "If they try any ghost tricks on me," he cried, "I'll play them another that will make them wish they had left me alone! You may tell the Brahmans that with my best salaam, and don't let me hear any more of such foolishness."

"Very well, Huzoor," replied Dost Ali.

THEREAFTER, for the greater part of a week, Murchison was so busy getting things ready to start work in earnest that he hardly gave any further thought to the threat of the Raja's ghost haunting the temple. On their part, the Brahmans veiled whatever plan they projected in such secrecy that Murchison forgot all about them. Otherwise he might have noticed that the little temple received stealthy visitors after nightfall, that a narrow path had been cleared up to the entrance, and a new door fixed on rusty hinges. Had curiosity prompted him to force the lock and peer within, he would have seen that sacrificial blood had been poured over the repulsive black image; moreover, that cups of milk and fresh eggs were placed at the base of the pedestal. For all of which he probably wouldn't have cared a cent, unless—But no one told him of these portentous signs. True, an unidentified man was found dead in the little compound one morning; but Murchison set the case down to one of a hundred causes of sudden death in India, refusing utterly to take credence in the whispered report of ghost bite.

He had finished a day of

stress and heat, the main object of which was to start work with the steam shovel on the morrow. Dost Ali's orders were to have steam in the boiler by sunrise; then the benighted heathen would behold the steam shovel move along a switch into position of battle and the up to date way of demolishing a hillside. In other words, he intended the day should be memorable in the annals of Marar, as one on which the glorious spectacle was witnessed of seeing the dirt fly. But Kismet and the Brahmans were arranging things otherwise; every man, woman, and child in Marar being fully informed, Murchison alone excepted.

He had stretched himself on his camp cot, and fallen into a fitful slumber, when he was roused by persistent scratching on the outer canvas flap of his tent. Imagining a prowling beast, he seized a stick; but on reaching the door he encountered a trembling old woman, who held the end of her sari drawn close across her face for fear of disclosing her wrinkled features to the wicked gaze of a sahib.

"What on earth do you want?" demanded Murchison.

"O Sahib," replied the old woman in a cracked voice, "I have come to say not to put fire in the devil engine tomorrow; that it is best for you to go away from here—you, who have been the cause of a great sorrow."

"I—who—what do you mean?" questioned Murchison in astonishment.

"Ah, Sahib, if you had not brought the devil engine here, then the Raja's spirit would not have gone to dwell in the Kali Temple, and the terror, which is that of death itself, fall upon her."

"Terror of death! Fall upon whom?" exclaimed Murchison, much bewildered. "I don't understand what you are talking about."

"It is true my English is not good; but if the Sahib will come and see, then he will know."

"But before I agree," protested Murchison guardedly, "you must tell me who sent you, whose life is in danger through some act of mine."

The old woman bent forward and whispered.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "The Brahmans—the Queen!"

"Even so, Sahib; but let him understand this is my own doing, for which my life is as good as worth nothing. Still, for her sake, whose ayah I am, I do not care what happens. If the Sahib can but witness her distress, then, by favor of the gods, something may be done."

"Just wait a moment, and I will go with you," consented Murchison.

He dived back into the tent, hastily drew on his



She Wore the Badge of Perpetual Widowhood.



clothes, and presently rejoined the old woman. She bade him follow at a safe distance, being careful to remember certain signs by which he was to be guided in case of danger. Proceeded then the strangest night adventure Murchison is ever likely to dwell upon. He was led into the city by a circuitous route, and taken to a house where he was urged to change into the white robes of a Brahman. His naturally dark complexion, tanned by the burning rays of the sun, was not far removed in shade from that possessed by a Lord of the Universe, and a dab of paint on the forehead passed well enough for a caste mark. The value of this disguise was obvious on again following the old woman into the street. Stray loiterers immediately gave way before him, salaaming low with a greeting of the highest respect. His inability to respond aptly suited the scornful character of a godship. For the same reason no one ventured to question his passage of the palace gates in the wake of his tottering guide.

**B**UT once safely in an inner court, the old woman beckoned him into the shadow of a cloister. She laid a finger on her lips to enjoin silent caution, opened a low door, and crept into a narrow passage. This seemed to lead with more directness than usual to the apartments reserved for women. At least Murchison judged so from sounds that came out of the walls; though he could see nothing for some distance, not even the old woman's form a few steps in advance. Presently a light glimmered ahead, the passage turned upon a sharp angle, and Murchison passed into a spacious hall or chamber. An illumination from crystal lamps revealed a decoration of trees, flowers, birds, and insects on walls and ceiling so realistic that the momentary impression of stepping into a garden was amazingly deceptive. At the farther end was suspended a curtain of rich embroidery, and proceeding from the other side of this came a woman's voice in plaintive stress of emotion. It was mingled in a strange accompaniment, as if a wind might be playing on harp strings, rising and falling in soft, droning cadences, and at intervals ceasing altogether. Whatever mysterious agency produced the music, it remained invisible.

Murchison had paused in uncertainty, when his guide motioned him toward the curtain. This she drew aside, and Murchison stood on the threshold of what transpired to be an inner room, or rather an endless suite sinking into dim obscurity, and made indefinitely puzzling by the reflections in huge, silver framed mirrors. Somewhere in the background—or a mirror, he was not sure which—he noticed a group of motionless waiting women; but his whole interest was immediately centered on a figure only a few paces distant. A young woman, still in the period of girlhood, was seated on a low divan, swaying her body from side to side, as if her mind was burdened with some calamity that gave no respite or rest. She was attired all in white after the Hindu fashion, and the only ornament she wore was an iron bracelet,—the badge of perpetual widowhood and suffering for the husband toward whom she had never had opportunity to bear any sentiment.

For some moments Murchison remained stationary, undecided what to do, when the young queen turned a look upon him, apparently noticing his presence for the first time. And that look he will never forget. Upon a lovely, oval face, with eyes whose luminous depths suggested the things of which a poet dreams but cannot speak intelligently, was set an expression of haunting terror that overwhelmed Murchison. It seemed to congeal the blood in his veins and cause his heart to stop beating. Before he could master this feeling, she rose, gave expression to a cry of suppressed anguish, and cast herself at his feet. Now, for all he knew, it might have been in the young Queen's interest that he should pose as a Brahman; but his sense of due respect toward women revolted at her prostration before him and endeavor to kiss his ankles. As gently as possible he strove to release her embrace; while she poured forth a torrent of supplication, not even daring to lift her eyes to his presumably holy countenance.

It was the old woman who brought this embarrassing scene to a rather abrupt conclusion. In a shrill voice she summoned attendants, who assisted the young Queen to pass away in a series of bewildering reflections, while she literally dragged Murchison beyond the curtain.

**N**OW the Sahib sees what he has done!" she remarked pointedly.

"I don't see at all," he responded; "though of course I feel—well, I don't know exactly how I feel, except mighty sorry for whatever troubles her Highness."

"The Sahib is sorry?" repeated the old woman with a touch of scorn. "Did he not bring his accursed devil engine here, and anger the Brahmins? Does he think he is stronger than they? *Ai, Ahi!*" she lifted her arms and wailed. "At sunrise the Sahib will see. He will behold the young Queen come forth to worship the spirit of her husband in the little Kali temple, which the Sahib has desecrated with his devil engine. But, O

Sahib, she will not return to this place; for the Brahmins have proclaimed that the spirit of the late Raja now inhabits a king cobra dwelling in that temple. As the Sahib will know, death comes very quickly after a bite from the king cobra, and that is what the Brahmins wish for the young Queen, because then the people will cry aloud that such a sacrifice in truth makes it a holy place, inhabited by the angry spirit of the late Raja. They will rise up and destroy the devil engine, and the Sahib will be fortunate if he escapes. Does he not see now what he has done?"

"Great Heavens! What diabolical rascals!" was all Murchison could ejaculate, such was his enraged horror.

Beyond this he was not given opportunity to express his feelings. The old woman suddenly took alarm, hastening him into the passage. There she handed him over to the care of a servant, by whom he was silently conducted out of the palace.

In a dazed way Murchison noticed unusual activity for the hour, both in the environs of the palace and the streets rapidly traversed back to the house where he resumed his own identity. Then he was left to find his way unaided to the camp. In his preoccupied mental condition, he naturally missed the right path, and wandered around for an hour or so in the dry bed of a nullah. Consequently, he reached camp as a streak of crimson glory tinged the eastern horizon, and the cool breeze of dawn lifted the veil of gray mist clinging to the course of the river.

He was greeted by Dost Ali in much perturbation of spirit. "Sir," he said, "as I warned the Huzoor, the Brahmins have not been sleeping. At their bidding all our people have departed; therefore, no work can be done. I think something is going to happen. Still, as

then the state elephants in cloth of silver and tusks gold plated, and the gilt and red litter of the young Queen surrounded by palace guards. As in other parts, the general public brought up the rear, begging the rainbow in shades of costume.

Murchison was actuated by no definite impulse; but in striving to reach the temple could thrust his way only as far as his steam shovel, around which a space had been left respectfully clear. Kali had not as yet signified her pleasure concerning what was to be done with the steam shovel. The Queen's litter had been set down in front of the temple, and to gain a better survey Murchison climbed upon the engine platform. He could see across the little court over a vast sea of expectant faces, and was wondering if any good purpose would be served by running the steam shovel full speed into the temple, when a mighty inspiration fell upon him.

His hand quickly tested certain valves and levers; then—the multitude beheld an amazing spectacle. The shovel was backed up close to the wall, and the great boom swung round till its tip was poised just above the temple. From that descended two monstrous shell like objects, with sharp teeth that crushed in the little mud dome. Murchison's tense face peered out from behind the iron screen, as he hoisted away, swung the boom over the edge of the bank, and dropped a shower of debris into the river—all that composed the temple roof. He had lifted it very neatly. Such astounding rashness as this was received in awestricken silence. What would Kali do to the white Sahib and his devil engine? What vengeance would now fall upon one who defied the Brahmins? Round came the boom again, down rattled the monster iron shells, and up



This Terror of the Devil Engine Had Seized Upon the Multitude.

the Huzoor ordered, I have fire under the boiler of the steam shovel, and the bubble in the little glass tube is exactly as the Honor wished."

Murchison merely nodded and went into his tent. Conflicting thoughts, principally anxiety for the young Queen's fate, left little interest in the day's achievement. Her beautiful, dread stricken face haunted his recent memory. He methodically heated a pot of coffee over a spirit lamp to quicken his mental grasp on the situation. What in the world could he do, one man in the face of a possible multitude, to prevent the young Queen sacrificing herself in such a horrible manner at the instigation of the worst band of avaricious humbugs at present inhabiting this earth? That she was not a willing victim was evident; yet so strong was the hold of the Brahmins on public opinion that he had no doubt she would go without open protest to her probable death in worshipping a black cobra, proclaimed to be the spirit of her husband. It occurred to him that the best thing to do was to rout out and kill the cobra; but the opportunity for such action was already past.

**A** BLAST from conch shells and the wild beating of tom-toms brought him from the tent, to find a great crowd surging through the camp, with the temple entirely surrounded. Overhead the sun sent vast streamers of golden light across the sky, illuminating a strange procession moving toward the temple. In the van were gesticulating dancing girls, tossing upon the air a weird nasal chant. Following them waddled fat, half nude gossams wreathed in jasmine flowers, fakirs all skin and bone, priests blowing conch shells, tom-tom beaters, and white robed, lordly Brahmins casting disdainful glances;

went the hideous image, bound riverward. Murchison gave a triumphant blast on his whistle, as a guttural shout proclaimed the wonder of the multitude. Murchison came back with the shovel to clean up what remained of the shattered walls, and carried aloft in the steel claws a squirming, wriggling black object. His late Highness's reincarnation also went into the river—in sections.

But before this terror of the devil engine had seized upon the multitude. Clearly it was mightier than Kali! A howl rent the air, and a wild stampede for the city began. The elephants trumpeted and cleared a path through the tom-tom beaters, fat gossams and thin fakirs fell over one another, calling aloud upon their gods, while the Brahmins in their flight did not pause to curse those of low caste who by touch contaminated their garments. Even the guards fled to a neighboring hill, leaving the Queen's litter unprotected. As Murchison subsequently expressed it, he let the engine whistle scream at full power to keep them going. It was Dost Ali who, rejoicing in the destruction of the temple, advised Murchison to complete his rescue of the Queen while the saving grace of time remained.

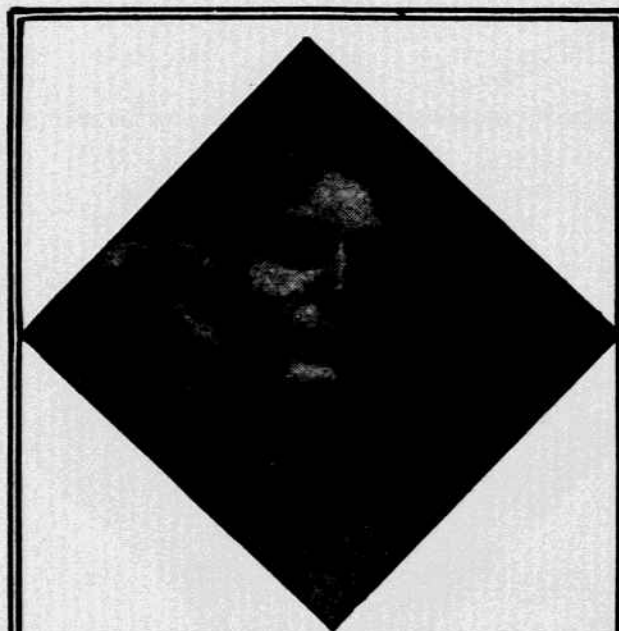
"Sir," said he, "for her to return to the palace after this means certain death. By those accursed Brahmins she will never be forgiven. Clearly it was intended from the beginning that you should protect her from harm."

"That looks like a fact," replied Murchison; "but how is it to be done? How am I to get her away from this place?"

He noticed that the panic had spent itself, the flight

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## How Did Mme. du Barry Keep Her Bloom of Youth?

du Barry (to a love-lorn courtier of half her age)—"Ah, but I am no longer young, Monsieur!"

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opening their mouths and sticking out their tongues to show that their throats were all right; (2) pulling down their lower lids and rolling up their eyes to show that they did not have trachoma; (3) lifting up their curls and braids to show that they had not pediculosis, which is the scientific and elegant nom de plume of a common and vulgar bug.

I saw the immediate application of these examinations when I was visiting in an East Side home one day and the little son of the house raced in from school waving a card. Taking it for granted that this was some certificate of merit, I pulled him into my lap and prepared to praise him. A moment later I set him gently but hastily on the floor; for there on the card printed both in English and Jewish was the information that the boy had pediculosis, telling just what it was, how it was communicated, and what must be done about it.

Were I an independent microbe, loving my work and anxious to keep busy, I should bitterly resent these civic nurses. Imagine! Warned from the school by the school nurse, I fly to a public playground, where if anywhere I might expect to pursue my avocation in peace. But no! I am met by the playground nurse, who delivers philippics against me and protects people even in their pleasuring. Discouraged, I take refuge in a dark room tenement, and even there the tuberculosis nurse still pursues me. Hard for a self respecting microbe to make a living these days!

THE varieties of the civic nurse are endless. At an illustrated health lecture I met a specimen of a new kind, which I shall call the moving picture nurse. She had come there to see some films tried out that she had arranged.

"Isn't it a splendid idea?" she cried enthusiastically. "Everybody goes to see moving pictures; so why shouldn't they learn from them how to keep well? We've got to use every new thing we can think of. You've seen that film about the baby that got sick because it had poor milk and got well when they gave it good milk, haven't you? And that one about the flies, where they look as big as elephants and do horrible things to your food? Well, we wanted something like that for tuberculosis; but the tubercle bacillus isn't big enough to photograph, and you can't just have a story of disease and death with an invisible microbe as the villain, because it would be so distressing that people wouldn't want to look at it. So I just made up a good old fashioned love story with a rich young man as the hero and a beautiful young working girl as the heroine. He sees how the dark, airless room where she lives, which he owns, breeds tuberculosis that is killing her; so he builds a model tenement for working people. She grows well; they are married and live happy ever after. I hope the landlords will see that it is up to them

to build better tenements, and that the poor will understand that they have got to keep their homes clean and open the windows."

I turned to the screen, and they began to run the film. The nurse had done more than plan the story: she had acted one of the parts in it herself. I saw her rushing through the picture, clearing the stuffy room where the heroine lived, opening the windows, feeding the drooping heroine milk and eggs, and taking her out into the sunlight; then going into the cluttered back yard, throwing up her hands in horror, and superintending its cleaning, explaining to the rich lover what should be done in a tenement looking remarkably like the famous "lung block" to me, and at last bringing the lovers together like a sort of beneficent angel in uniform. She strained the unities of classical drama; but she got her idea over the footlights. It was pretty good acting, and splendid propaganda, and it brought up the question whether we should train our civic nurses not only to dramatic authorship, but give them a season or two on the stage as well.

THIS profession of civic nursing is one that women have created for themselves. Our able, well educated young women are not satisfied with the world as it is, and they do not think it fair to dump all the needed improvements on the shoulders of slow moving Evolution. They are taking hold of matters themselves and trying to set things right. We've developed these women by education, by freedom, and by all sorts of opportunities. They have developed this new profession, and we are all reaping the advantage of it. It's sort of a progressive House That Jack Built. These exceptional women are necessary to solve our civic health problems, just as the exceptional Florence Nightingale was needed to organize the nursing in the Crimea and Clara Barton to organize our own Red Cross. Unfortunately we haven't yet been able to get nearly enough of them. Said the head of one of the largest training schools a few days ago:

"Yes, there are always positions waiting for nurses who have the capacity for civic work: the demand is greater than the supply. What we all try to do is to keep out of the profession girls who are not pretty certain to succeed. We do not admit them under twenty-one or over thirty; we keep them on probation at least three months; and we try to get college women. The very best there are is what we need."

All this made the voluminous person I had met on the car—that modern Saïrey Gamp, with her ignorance, her brogue, her dirt, and her rusty black—seem utterly impossible. And yet there still rings in my ears her final dictum on the science she had served:

"You can take it from me, Miss, there ain't no such thing as jurns!"

## THE BLACK COBRA

ceased, and several of the more venturesome were turning back toward the scene of the dread Kali's defeat.

"Together," remarked Dost Ali, "you and I would make a good account of these vermin; but there be thousands, and at last they would prevail even over the Huzoor's engine when the bubble fell in the little glass tube, as the Honor knows. Best, therefore, for him to go swiftly to the landing and prepare a boat. I will bring the Queen. This I swear by Allah."

WHAT means of persuasion Dost Ali intended to urge, Murchison did not pause to inquire. When Dost Ali swore by Allah, it was certain that somehow the thing would be done, though as to the method employed it was perhaps best not to investigate too closely. Murchison jumped for the landing of the works, and in a few minutes was assisting a trembling, white robed figure into the boat. Acting on Dost Ali's advice, he put the boat straightway over to the opposite shore. An advance party gathered on the one they had left, shouting threats and curses. A random shot that splashed in the water nearby caused Murchison to turn in his seat and shake his fist defiantly.

"I'll be back to give you all the satisfaction you want," he cried, "once I have placed your intended victim in safety. Meanwhile give my salaam to the Brahmins, and tell them they had better not lay a finger on that steam shovel, or they'll get worse than what happened to Kali."

Thus they dropped down with the stream, mile after mile, until the heat of noonday made shelter imperative. So the boat was steered into the bank, where a wide spreading banyan afforded pleasant shade. Then

Dost Ali went off to find the best means of reaching the nearest Sahib's house.

Concerning the way in which the young Queen discovered that Murchison was the white Brahman of the night before, of how her gratitude was expressed by placing her delicate fingers upon his forehead, and his oath, sealed with a kiss, to sever the iron bracelet of iniquity with his own hands, much might be written. If but a few words of each other's language were mutually understood, the unspoken voice of sentiment was perhaps even more effective. Presently his arm stole round her waist, and her head fell upon his shoulder. The great banyan, seeing all, stretched out its sheltering arms above them, parrots of brilliant plumage peered from the branches and discussed the matter, a monkey swinging from limb to limb paused for a moment, and then went on to carry the news story into the jungle. An inquisitive squirrel climbed down and with brazen effrontery brushed Murchison's cheek with his whisker. This startled Murchison out of their silence. Whereat, in her happiness, the young Queen laughed, perhaps for the first time in her existence.

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